

MASTERLY STORIES OF AMERICAN RANCH LIFE ::

By HENRY WALLACE PHILLIPS
Author of the Famous RED SAUNDERS Tales

(Copyright, 1915.)

"ONE time," said Red Saunders, "I was working on a ranch right near where old Zeke Scraggs held out—him and his wife. They were a queer pair of mates, but satisfactory to each other in the highest degree, and I think that's as far as marriage concerns most people. The last thing any one ought to do is to get married to please the neighborhood. Anyhow, it ain't to be done."

Foster, the intellectual giant of our place, said that Scraggs's personal appearance always made him think of the ravings of John McCulloch, done on a second-hand phonograph.

Scraggs was there with the brains and the muscle, if his looks didn't look well. Mrs. Scraggs was pretty and a dear little critter, if she was shy on think. Besides, as I say, it was strictly their business and they got along fine until one of the Missus's female relatives come out to call.

We got news this way. 'Twas evening and in his guarded tent this particular Turk wasn't dreaming about anything, when the door opens and in drifts E. C. W. Scraggs bearing the general appearance of a Swede hired man's hard-luck story—something special, even for Zeke—and a dark shadder fell all over everything, dimming the lights, the moment he put foot inside.

He set down with no remarks, and continued so for a space of time. Zeke was one of the kind that is allowed. Another fellow would get a call, but with him, everybody said, "Oh, that's just his way!" and let her flicker at that.

At last, with no warning, he pulls a book from his pocket, and puts on his specks.

"I am going to read you some poetry," says he.

"What's that?" inquires the Kid. "I," says Scraggs, "am a-goin' to read you some poetry."

"Me?" says the Kid. "No, you ain't, too!" and he starts for the door.

"You set quiet," says Scraggs, "and you'll hear something to yore advantage. Everybody set?"

"Let her slide, if so it must be," sighs Old Windy. "I ain't a crossin' every man in their performance of his duty."

Zeke held up his hand for peace and silence: "Friends, Romans, Countrymen," says he, "lend me some of your ears! This here diffusion was writ by a lady to a party by the name of Jove. In it she describes her sentiments. Why I turn it over to you will be explained—hearken!"

Memories of the time he was the tallest soldier in the whole of Julius Caesar's army, back at the old Royal Theater at St. Looney, come over Scraggs, and he just bellered this like a bull:

"Oh, Jove! Hurl thy fiery mountain full and fair
Into the quivering heat abysses of the Sun!
Stab through and through the palpitating mass
With loosed lightning's from thy orful hand,
And as fierce flames flare forth in fury wild
Feel full that all thy force cannot ere
forego
A tempest of such heat as that which burns
Within this passion bustle heart of mine!"

"Say!" says the Kid, mouth, ears and eyes open, "that's darn good—there's some tabasco to that!"

"Like it?" says Scraggs, surprised, looking around the bullpen. "How does it hit you, Red?"

"Well," I said, not wanting to get in too deep, "she tried for something, anyhow. Most of these darn poets write about the poorest 'go' known. Here I see a paper the other day with a picture of a man with a complete set of whiskers, and a poem by the same man. That poem would be—

"Till a mouse, with a bite.
Put an end, in despite,
To my pride and delight—
My canary!"

"That kind of thing lets me out. I hate canaries. I never see one in my life outside a barber shop."

"That's so!" says Windy. "Allus you find canaries inhabitin' barber shops. There's a reason for it."

"What's the reason?" says the Kid. "I be darned if I know!" says Windy; "but I'm with Red on this poem act. The lady got right up on her tippy-toes and threw the English language as far as she could. I ain't pretendin' I know what it's about, and I don't care. It sounds like the real thing."

"Well!" says Scraggs and wipes his specks, "I honest didn't know what to make of that stuff at first. Unlike Windy, I want to know what a thing means. The old stuff is mo' in my line." He laid down his specks and the book and stood himself up. "Yere's the sort of poetry I care to use my hearin' on," says he, and he grabs his chin with one hand, looks as if he'd been hit with a cramp where and when he least expected it, and

begins in a kind of melancholy howl: "Too too Beee-ee-ye, or not too beee-ye! That issis the keewesssion! Whether it iss nobler in the meeyind to suffer the slings and arrers of out-raageous fortune, or to take up arms agin a sea of troubles, and, by opposin, end them!" He stopped. "I could give you the hull darn business," says he, "that's what I call poetry."

Windy sat with his hands on his knees, looking at him.

"You do, do you?" says he. "So that's what you call poetry, and you understand it?"

"Sure I do!" says Scraggs.

"What kinder arms you going to take up agin a sea of troubles—fire-arms?"

There come a pause.

"Well, no!" says Scraggs; "no."

"No!" says Windy with force, "I reckon not! And you understand how to end a sea of troubles by opposin' them, do yer?"

"Then?" says Scraggs. "Well, that's so, too, ain't it?" He went over it in his mind. "Opposin, end 'em!" he mutters. "That's what it says all right. I learnt that off a real actor that got \$35 a week, and Shakespear's a man with a reputation. I don't know what to make of it. I never looked at it that way before."

He shook his head. "There ain't no damn sense to it, and that's a fact," says he. "You can't take up arms agin a sea of troubles with the least hope of success, and that 'opposin'-end-'em' proposition ain't got no grammar to it." His face brightened. "I reckon little Mary's cousin ain't such a low-grade poetry proposition as I thought." He got up to go, beckoning for me to follow.

Outside he said: "I'm plumb flustered by Windy! How about that Hamlet thing, Red?"

Not having anything else to say, I says the first thing that come to my mind. "The man was mad," says I.

"Oh, that's it?" says he, much relieved. "I hear some talk about that! You think he talked that way because he was off his nut?"

"Crazier than a bedbug, Zeke."

"Well, I'm glad to hear you say so. I paid that actor goat five dollars to learn me that, and I begun to feel I was stuck. I allus thought I'd made a hummer on the stage, but perhaps," says he, "it's just as well I took to punching cows. So long. That cousin of my wife's is happening along day after tomorrow—you and the rest of the boys give us a call."

We done our best by Zeke. When the lady arrived the whole kit and caboodle sashays over to his place, dressed to kill. All brand-new neckerchers, greased boots and white hats starched and ironed. It was a gallant company.

Zeke's wife looked like the visitor was already too much for her, and as for Zeke, he near fell on our necks.

"Honest, Red," says he, "I'm a-doin' my best, but 'tis orful. This lady has so many different kinds of education, and so many fine feelin's I step around like there was a corpse in the house. I dassent eat my vittels comfortable. The missus, she don't care a hoot whether I put my pie away with a knife or not, s'far as she's concerned, but she tips me off on the strict quiet not to pull off nothin' like that in front of the visitor. They eat pie with a fork only where she comes from," says Mary.

Now, what's it to anybody how a man eats his pie? And everything is so 'beeyutiful,' so 'altogether charming!' and the devil knows what, that I'd cut this play and money for the woods if 'tweren't a mean trick to play on the little gal. I have known folks," says Windy, "that had any quantity of education and yet could live peaceable along with other folks—but," he took hold of me, "there she is!" says he. "Get experience with your own right hand!"

Miss Belinda Dabbleday stood about five foot two, and was thin to match. She had little carpenter shaving curls trickling from the sides of her head, and she had for steady wear one of these oninterested, fixed, delightful smiles. Also she had ribbons and flowers and truck stuck here and there like she was going to join a circus. I was mighty surprised by this, for that lady was forty-five years old if she was a minute. That's a mistake some females make. Scripture says you musn't put new wine in old bottles, and common sense says not to put an old face in young clothes.

She comes for me with a little girlish skip and a hop. "Oh!" says she, "is this Mr. Saunders? The great Red Saunders? Oh!" And she clasped her hands and near fell over backward, she was that overcome. If any man had smeared me like that we'd have had a romp, but what you going to do to a lady? I felt like the dog catcher had got me, but I says:

"Listen, Fair Lady!" says I. "Remember the old saying: 'Satan mischiefs always finds for ideal hands to do?'"

She looked at me surprised to death. Then she begun to giggle and pulled out a little book. "Let me have that, will you?" says she. "You don't want it?"

"Have what? Want what?" says I. "That ideal joke," says she. "I can use it."

"Help yourself," says I, not letting on she had me faded. Afterward she explained to me that she gobbled up all strange little sayings that looked good to her, and run 'em off when

she bullet head to his round feet.

Fergy come from lowly, which was as good a thing as ever happened to that State. He was as romantic as a cock-eyed pawnbroker.

"Ferguson, old horse," I says, "are you chivallus?"

"Hunh?" says Fergy.

"Chivallus? Bold? Gay? Gallant?"

"Hunh?" says Fergy. "Say kin I see you later about that lame steer?" and away he goes.

"Oh!" says Miss Belinda. "You are so unkind! To make fun of all my little ideals!" But there was that gleam of horse sense way back in their eyes.

"Listen, Fair Lady!" says I. "Remember the old saying: 'Satan mischiefs always finds for ideal hands to do?'"

She looked at me surprised to death. Then she begun to giggle and pulled out a little book. "Let me have that, will you?" says she. "You don't want it?"

"Have what? Want what?" says I. "That ideal joke," says she. "I can use it."

"Help yourself," says I, not letting on she had me faded. Afterward she explained to me that she gobbled up all strange little sayings that looked good to her, and run 'em off when

"MISS BELINDA"

"You have the name right, ma'am, and I'm near two-fifty in weight."

Now right there I see a flicker in that lady's tired eyes. 'Twas most as good as a wink. It said: "We're on to each other, you and me," and you can always get along on them terms. So I sat down for a peaceable chin.

"What's fetched you so far from home?" says I. I sure would have got a sensible answer, but Ferguson of Little Heart has to roll along and up goes the voice and on comes the smile, and here we have the wiggle once more.

"Oh!" says she, "I just couldn't stand it in the East!" The men are so ignoble and unchivalous! All their lives wrapped in sordid money getting! No romance anywhere!"

I looks Fergy up and down from

chance offered. But it was a continual shock to her to find that plain cow-punchers actually talked the English language and had heard of Christopher Columbus.

Why, I've spent whole winters with nothing much to do but read, and I've gone a wide range, from Hostetter's Stomach Bitters Almanack, through the Family Medical Adviser to Byron's Poems, with all kinds of job lots of sense and nonsense on the side. Yet, if ever I used a word of more'n two syllables that lady looked at me as though she thought I'd stole it.

On the other hand, I drew information out of that lady. She was in the writing business, and I'd never met any one in that trade before. I always supposed that a poet sat down, gnashed his teeth, waved his hair, and when he was just about to blow his lid off with excitement, grabbed his trusty pen and wrote.

bunch, believe me. She's got something else in her mind. She ain't second cousin to the durn fool she pretends to be."

It was a sharp kid, for its years, and I stood with him there. It come to my head that Miss Belinda didn't propose to leave the State of North Dakota in a single state. "Object, Matrimony," was her motto. But her feeling for fun was nigh to queer her.

Then come some new folks to the ranch, and a new stage for Miss Belinda.

Before that though, she honeyed up to Ferguson. She flattered him and eyed him till that ox of a man took notice. You see, Fergy had cattle and wheat and money, and lots of poetic things like that, and Miss Belinda was tired of the hustle. Fergy was honest and mean. He thought himself a gray blade and he was drier than a swamp on a wet Sunday. But you remember that old Scotch story,



"No romance anywhere!"

It was very surprising to me to hear this lady tell how calm she went about making that hot one concerning Jove. Backing and filling and rubbing out and sticking in like grandma's crazy quilt. But that's the way of it, every time.

Outside, for business purposes, Miss Belinda was all gush and giggle and sobs, but when you come to tacks, she was there with the wallop. I liked it. We pulled a good stroke. She sprung her little notebook on me, and I had lots of fun tangling her up in her feelings.

But poor old Scraggs and wife, they was like a pair of chickens that's hatched an alligator egg. Miss Belinda would take Scraggs out for a walk in the evening and speak to him of the untrammelled effervescence of the sunset. And more like that. And Scraggs would rub his bald head and talk at random, dragging his legs behind him on the way home.

The other boys took to the brush when they see her approach. "No!" yells the Kid, when I reproved him. "I won't stay around and help! Last time I took her for a ride she stopped short in front of a blamed old hunk of bad land and asked me if I didn't feel a haunting sense of its beautiful vacuous desolation. Now what's a vacuous desolation? I know what those words mean as well as any man. I got old boy Webster's say for it. That is, each one separate. But you play 'em in pairs, and what in thunder do you make of it? That lady is stringing the

when they asked the mother about the girl's marriage? "Fine, mon! Fine!" says she. "To be sure, Jennie hates the guid mon, but they's allus a something!" I reckon Miss Belinda was a philosopher. Not to seem conceited, the poetic side of her had rather have one of us other boys, but the practical side told her it weren't to be done. Hence, Fergy.

I said, careless, one day, we having reached the stage when I could josh her fierce, "I bet you don't get him!" She looked me steady in the eye.

"I've always wanted a pair of white kid gloves to there!" says she, touching her shoulder. "It is a wedding present, if I do?"

"If it breaks me," says I. "Shake!" says she.

I looked at her for a minute and the strong liking I had for her come to my mouth. She was awful square, for a woman, underneath the nonsense.

"I couldn't wish Fergy better luck," I says.

"Red!" says she, "I know you mean it—and I never heard words that pleased me more. There was the start of real tears in her eyes, so I changed the subject, sudden."

Then come our Injun friend to the ranch with his little boy. This was Toon-yeh, the Strong Man. And I'm sticking to the plain truth when I says his name belied him none. He went up in the air six foot and eight inches, and if he was an inch around the chest, he was fifty. I sure would have liked to mix it with him. He

was the kind of young feller I could have cut loose with, and not felt I ought to be arrested for doing it. But there wasn't much fight in poor Toon-yeh. He'd been run through the hard-luck chute for fair. Lost wife, father and four kids by smallpox, in one month, went mad and shot all his stock and burned his shack down. Now there was nothin' left but him. Little Wal-be-Sahpedon, or Billy Black, as we always called him. Nothing but his hands and the baby, and I knew the time when the Injun could have cleaned up twenty thousand dollars.

That was a great kid, though. A jinn dandy, handsome little six-year-old, with legs and back as plumb as a bank building, and a little fat tummy like a watermelon.

Toon-yeh thought everything of the baby. Billy Black had his little war bonnet, his fine beaded moccasins, his poggamoggan and his pipe, as good as any brave. If he wasn't a great boy, I never see one. Not one of us would think of coming back from town without some kind of trinket or play toy for Billy Black.

When old Wind River comes a-rolling home from his semi-annual bender, he toted one of these here little organs revivalists use, behind him, on Buck.

"For li'l Billy," says he. "Learn to play on it when he gets bigger. Never had no religion, po' li'l boy!" And Windy weeps to think of Billy's neglected education. Windy couldn't separate religion from a parlor organ. He had an old maid aunt who had religion and a parlor organ, and that was his one experience with either.

But what do you guess about our friend Belinda? She staked herself into the game too. Sure! Belinda played muggles and "first lick" in the two-ole-cat game, and Anthony, Anthony over. She could never learn to spin a top, which is more of an art than your memory leads you to believe it is. How many of us spun a top on the first try, to show little Billy? Just exactly none. I've seldom been more disappointed than when I heaved that top. I thought it was so funny them other monkeys couldn't do a simple thing like that! So I winds her up careful, snaps her down as of yore, and she whirled off on her ear without even as much as land on the peg! Belinda looks at me with that funny little smile on her face and says: "How elaborately trivial!"

Belinda certainly come out strong with that kid. The practical side of her made a natural born musician. And she was a wise woman. Found out what the little lad really liked and taught him that, instead of things he had no use for. He wanted to draw pictures—all Injuns are great for that. So she buys him a little box of paints and paper and brushes and things, and here we have a full bloom artist on the ranch! How he did tear into that! And the wise face of him, all puckered up while he made his nice red cows and blue chickens and all! Then from this it was easy to get him to do his A, B, C's, because she told him that was a kind of drawing, too. Yes sir, in spite of all the sidestepping and nonsense, Belinda had a master plan in her loft, and she was a straight grained bit of lumber, working hard to teach the baby something, for I swear she took no note of the fact that she made a hit with the boys by doing so.

The pride Billy took in his work was pay enough. One day he comes to me with a most magnificent red affair I had no trouble in recognizing—usually I was a little slow in hooking up with Billy's picture ideas.

"Great!" says I. "That's grand, Billy! That rose is so natural I can almost smell it."

He backed away and eyed me. I gathered at once something had slipped. There was the expression of pained surprise we only see on the face of the person of ability when his works ain't appreciated.

"Rose," says he, in a deep voice, "that are no roth—that steer cow. Believe me, I never worked harder to square anything. But no go. He sighed deep and trundled along with his work of art.

Well, sir, a kid—a good kid—is a wonderful magician. You couldn't guess what a change was made by little Billy Black. The lad spelt all that was meant by 'Home' to every man Jack of us. And to what man is that a dearer word than to the man who never had a home?

Well, it braced Fergy up to the point of being real attentive to Miss Belinda. It got so he used to tote around after her, open. They rode together, went for walks, and read books together. And Belinda could handle words—none better. She honeyed him with flattery, and she teased him with the expression of her curious kind of feller, like you and me and the rest of us. And if a person keeps pouring molasses on you, you sure do get stuck on it after a while. Leave Belinda alone to work the thing in good shape! But Fergy? He was the dearest old slaver on the mouth organ that ever mislaid the English language. He hadn't the nerve to speak out, so the thing backed and filled and hauled around to another quarter, until Zeke Scraggs was fit to murder Ferguson. "Ef he'd only clear that matter up, wife and me could take a little rest," says he. "Ef he don't get down to testimony afore long, I'm going to knock him crooked for triflin' with Belinda's girlish feelin's."

The boys come for miles around to hear how the match was progressing, for no old ladies' sewing bee has anything on the wild, free cowpuncher when there's a bit of gossip in the air.

Fergy gives a picnic one day and Belinda come out strong. Played on the guitar, sung love songs and disported herself most entertainingly generally. But Fergy didn't come to center and we was perfectly disgusted.

"Nothing to it, Red," says the Kid. "That feller Ferguson's afraid of his own feet. He ain't got nerve in ten million years to ask a woman to marry him. I bet you a pound of Durham he lets it fade."

"I take you, as a sporting proposition," says I. "Not at all that I expect to win. There's two sides to every question. Kid—inside and outside. All we see is the outside. I bet you on the inside, blind."

"Done!" says the Kid. "And I hope you win, for I kinder got a warm spot, in spite of my nature, for Miss Belinda. What in the name of Moses she sees in Fergy is hid from my sight, as you say. But, s'longs she wants him, I make for her."

It looked like a lost bet for two weeks, and then come little Billy Black to the rescue. First off, it looked like we lost little Billy Black. That would have been a sad day on our ranch. I tell you, honest, I don't think a man of us could have borne staying on the ranch if the kiddie had been killed. Well, the play come up like this. 'Twas a sweltering, rotten, melting, oozy, Eastern day, that wound up about two o'clock with an approaching thunder storm. All hands were lying around sitting, sweating and miserable, waiting for the fuss to come and blow the muck away.

Unbeknownst to us, Billy slips out, with his brand new drawings and his brand new slicker, to go over to Ferguson's. And as mighty good luck would have it, Belinda, was on her way from Zeke's shack, to get some soda for the wife, who was always sick to her stomach in thunderous weather. That got a highly capable person on the scene.

Well, the squall broke like a bomb shell. Here she comes a-roaring, and the wind with a punch behind it, John L. Sullivan style.

I sent Belinda, husky woman though she was, into the side of Ferguson's tent, a-ming. As Fergy come out, they both see poor little Billy Black, with his nice drawings under one arm, and his nice new slicker grabbed in the other hand, headed for one of them cussed Chantay Seeche sink holes, and the wind dusting him straight into it at a gallop. I landed into one of them water traps one night and I was almost drowned before help came. They were like wells, with banks of straight slippery mud that wouldn't even allow you a finger grip. Once in there, it was all over with little Billy Black, bar help, handy and able.

The plucky little kid wouldn't let go of his drawings nor his slicker. He was an Injun, and he played it win all or lose all.

That lunk-head of a Ferguson just stood there, paralyzed. But Belinda took one look, shucked her umbrella and her skirts, and after the kid she pelted. Yessir! without a second's hesitation, although she told me afterward my yarn was clear in her memory at the time.

Kerplash! Goes Billy Black, and Kerplash! Again, goes Belinda. What with the howling, tearing wind, the flashes of lightning that seemed to turn the whole world inside out, the banging and hammering of the thunder and the sudsing and floundering in the creek, it was something of a performance. Belinda could swim with one hand and write a poem with t'other, so she managed to keep both afloat. Meantime, Fergy had gone loco altogether. He went't that he was scared, but jarred witless. He couldn't swim a stroke, so for him to jump in would only have made one more to drown. He parts with his common sense and yells "Help!" and "Police!" There weren't much help in sight, and positively no police. But the mercy of Providence had sent old Zeke a-hunting for Belinda. Them arms of his made short work of landing the pair.

There's Billy Black still holding on to the slicker, but mourning the ruin of his lovely drawings, and Belinda in a rig not quite the thing for afternoon wear, but nobody really the worse.

Realizing what a flummox we'd be in when we missed the kid, Zeke grabs him up and pelted over to our ranch.

Believe me, there was a fuss when our youngest was restored to us! We had just missed him and were getting wild-eyed, when Zeke landed.

There's a fool notion I wish never show any feeling that Injuns geezer responsible for that idee could have seen Toon-yeh's face when he caught up his little boy! It wasn't tears, but tears are only salt water at the best. The spark that grew in the man's burnt-out eyes was a thing a bit looney. The rest of us was ed with so much excitement, and petting and darning, for we did cuss him with joyful hearts, creeps under a bunk till the disturbance quits.

After things quieted down and Zeke had told the story of Belinda and gone, Toon-yeh comes to me.

"Red," says he, "Belinda, she good woman. I make merry. I work hard for that one. She save Billy."

I looks at him a minute and thinks she might do worse, when old Windy chips in. "I don't reckon," says he, "that Toon-yeh's lookin' for a monopoly. S'pose we make it unammonous?"

"Count me in!" says the Kid.

"I'm on!" says George.

"Let her go!" says the rest, and I'm still speechless.

"What's the matter with you, Red?" says Windy. "Ain't welchin', are you? That was a game play for a lady, and looks to me like she orter get her pick of the bunch."

"I woke up with a snap. 'My marker's on,' says I. 'But who's to tell her all this?'"

"You!" says they.

So that afternoon, before the grass was dry, I slides over to Zeke's house, dressed in my best, and offers Miss Belinda the hand, heart and fortune of every man on the ranch, red and white, tall or short, good or bad, she was pleased to choose.

For once in her life I see Belinda on the run. She was all broke up.

"Thank 'em all, Red, as I thank you," she says. Then the corners of her mouth twitched a little—Belinda always said the joke. "But add that it isn't necessary, for I have just accepted Mr. Ferguson!"

So everybody was happy.